

# Hack, by popular demand: Serial killers are hot

KILLERS, from Page 1G

"American Maniacs," that feeds off the likes of Charles Manson, Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer. Its host assures Mickey that he bested all serial killers except Manson in the ratings. Mickey gives a resigned sigh. "It's hard to beat the king," he acknowledges.

"Natural Born Killers" plays serial murder for laughs, as did director John Waters' "Serial Mom," starring Kathleen Turner as a housewife with a killer instinct. The release of both movies this year signals how deeply serial killers have lodged themselves in the nation's imagination: They are now ripe for satire.

It also confirms that in popular entertainment, serial killers have become what vampires were to Victorian audiences and giant lizards and bugs were to audiences during the height of the Cold War.

"Every particular era embodies its deepest fears in some archetype of a monster, inventing new clothing for the archetype," explains Harold Schechter, a professor of literature and popular culture at Queens College in New York City who is also the author of "Depraved," a new true-crime book about a man whom Schechter labels the first documented serial killer in America.

"The serial killer is our mythic monster, touching on the gnawing fears of the day," Schechter says. "He's all ours."

## Making of 'serial' killers

By FBI definition, serial killers are distinct from mass murderers, who kill a large number of people in one fell swoop, and spree murderers, who simply extend that swoop to a few locations over a few days. Serial killers, by contrast, operate methodically over time and take breaks.

They have always existed and always commanded rapt attention, from the days of Jack the Ripper and later the Boston Strangler. But there was no neat phrase to hang on them, and little understanding of them, until the mid-1970s. That's when Robert Ressler, who worked in the FBI's Behavioral Sciences Unit, first hitched the word serial to the word killer and coined a landmark phrase.

"It's certainly become a household word — if you could fax me a financial royalty for it, that would be great," jokes Ressler, who retired from the FBI in 1990.

Today he lectures on college campuses and — no kidding — cruise ships. Vacationers cap off a day of tanning or shopping by attending his most popular talk, "The Silence of the Lambs: Myths and Realities."

Once a label existed for serial killers, law enforcement authorities recognized them in places where they previously had not. The modern news media's ability to react so quickly, along with its appetite for sensationalism, produced detailed — and compelling — facts about each case.

Consider the haunting gallery of villains assembled in the last two decades: Bundy, who preyed on young women. The Son of Sam, who preyed on lovers in their cars. John Wayne Gacy, who murdered 33 boys and young men. Dahmer, who boiled and preserved portions of his victims.

Equally arresting is the cult of celebrity that enveloped each of them.

Earlier this year, around the time of Gacy's execution, people crowded a Los Angeles exhibition of his jailhouse paintings and paid up to \$20,000 per canvas, despite the work's dubious

quality. As one patron casually told a reporter there, "I guess he killed people better than he painted."

Meanwhile, the news media were crowded with commentary concerning "A Father's Story," an account by Lionel Dahmer, Jeffrey's dad, of the rearing of a serial killer. And some film festival audiences applauding a powerful documentary about the way law enforcement authorities in Florida accepted Hollywood money before they even caught the putative first-ever female serial killer they were pursuing. That movie, "Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer" will play at the Detroit Film Theatre next month.

Ressler says journalism about serial killers became so popular in the 1980s that barely a week passed without half a dozen reporters traipsing through the FBI's Behavioral Sciences Unit.

Fiction writers weren't far behind them. One was Thomas Harris, whose 1988 novel, "The Silence of the Lambs," did more to unleash the current flood of serial killer fiction and film than any other single work.

Ressler advised Harris on that book. He has also advised Patricia Cornwell, the best-selling novelist whose pathologist protagonist would have nothing to dissect were it not for serial killers, and Mary Higgins Clark, who cashed in on the craze with her "Loves Music, Loves to Dance."

## Numbers unrealistic

Ressler says that in these works and others, serial killers are rendered more ritualistic, cunning and strangely charismatic than they truly are. The Buffalo Bill character in "The Silence of the Lambs," for example, is a psychologically inconsistent, implausible compendium of actual cases, he says.

Det. Sgt. David Minzey, a criminal personality profiler for the Michigan State Police, says the main lie perpetuated by the entertainment media is that serial killers are everywhere.

"In fact, they're very rare," Minzey says. "If Michigan had one operating at any time, that would be a lot."

By contrast, Liz Hennessey, a buyer of mysteries and thrillers for the Borders chain of bookstores, estimates that more than 100 fiction titles a year revolve around serial killers.

"It's getting to be a little ridiculous," she acknowledges. "There's got to be a point of saturation, and it must be getting close."

A quick scan of film and video titles over the past decade and a half reveals serial killers aplenty.

They are set loose in Moscow

("Gorky Park," 1983), Buenos Aires ("Apartment Zero," 1988) and the world of championship chess ("Knight Moves," 1993). In both "Fear," a 1990 thriller starring Ally Sheedy, and "Eyes of Laura Mars," a 1978 showcase for Faye Dunaway, the female protagonists have strange psychic connections to serial killers.

Striving for something with a total absence of glamour and some psychological truth, director John McNaughton made "Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer" in 1990.

Mark Harmon has played a serial killer, in the 1986 TV miniseries "The Deliberate Stranger," based on Bundy. So has Judd Nelson, in the first "Relentless," a 1989 movie that finds him picking victims from the phone book.

It's in popular fiction, however, that the never-ending attempts to reinvent the serial killer — to give him new stalking grounds or bloodier methods of murder, to put better detectives on his trail and more pathetic victims in his path — have reached occasionally bizarre heights.

For a while, the rage was detectives who had to think like the serial killers to catch them. Then it was children being butchered. Then it was women being raped and tortured. Now it's serial killers whose actions are set somewhere else in time.

"Philosophical Investigation," a novel by Phillip Kerr that was published last year, envisions a future in which scientists can tag potential serial killers at birth.

"Torsos," a recent novel by John Peyton Cooke, travels back to the 1930s to tell the fact-inspired story of a Cleveland pharmacist who beheaded his young male victims.

"The Alienist," by Caleb Carr, which came out months later, chronicles the hunt for a serial killer in New York City in 1896, before forensic science had become very sophisticated. It became an instant best seller.

"These days, if you're going to do a serial killer, you have to think of a fresh way," notes Al Silverman, an editor at Viking press. He's polishing an end-of-year release titled "The Weatherman." In it, he explains, "A young, pretty woman gets her neck snapped at the beginning of each season."

That's tame stuff. Serial killers in other books work with much greater frequency and more panache. Listen to writer Stephen Solomita describe the ritual of the serial killer he invented in "A Good Day to Die," a 1993 novel:

"There's a series of seven murders

of homosexuals," Solomita says. "Their eyelids and their nipples have been removed and their penises have been tied up in a leather thong. The media dubs the killer King Thong."

## The grislier, the better

Otto Penzler, owner of the Mysterious Bookshop in New York City and a publisher of thrillers, says the delicious thrill people derive from serial killer novels or movies is merely an extension of the charge they've always received from murder mysteries. It's just that the increasing grisliness of real-life crime has upped the ante for fiction.

"It's not enough anymore to have a vicar who murders someone in the garden with poison," Penzler says. "It doesn't titillate anymore. But a guy stalking people in a neighborhood one by one — that's titillating. The stakes are raised."

More than that, serial killers validate the special fears of Americans today. Since people have felt special anxiety about random crime, we are transfixed by serial killers, who are the most horrifying examples of it. They defy explanation, and we cannot anticipate or deter them.

Serial killers strike to other modern fears as well, Schechter notes.

We are concerned about preserving the nuclear family and protecting children from abuse and abandonment; we dread what will happen if we fail. The serial killer, as rendered in many true and fictional accounts, is not only an enemy of domestic stability, slaughtering whole families, but also a product of its demise. He is the mistreated, misbegotten child come back to prey on the society that failed him.

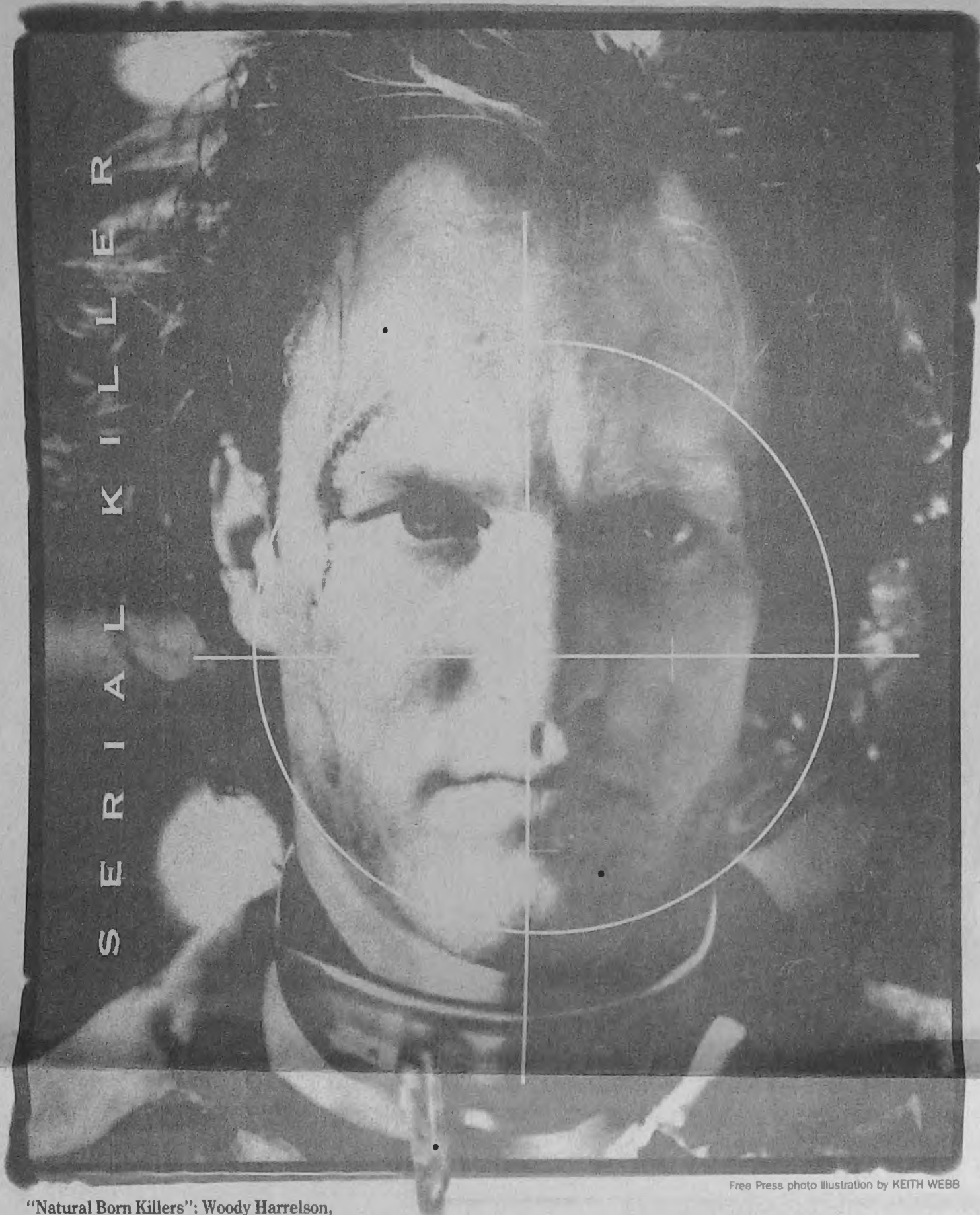
We find it entertaining to encounter him in books and on film because in these media, he is someone else's nightmare, not ours, making us feel safer, luckier, blessed.

"It's like stopping and gawking at a car accident," noted John Waters, director of "Serial Mom" and an aficionado of serial killer nonfiction. "It's literary rubbernecking, and you think: 'Thank God, that's not me.'"

In these media, the serial killer — and, by extension, the anxieties he embodies — can also be controlled. He is almost always captured. He is almost always punished.

"Serial killer books give us a sense of security," says Edward Stewart, author of "Mortal Grace." "The killer gets what's coming to him. Evil is defeated."

S E R I A L K I L L E R



Free Press photo illustration by KEITH WEBB

"Natural Born Killers": Woody Harrelson, above, and Juliette Lewis, below right, join a growing legion of screen serial killers.

ALL  
SIGHTS  
SET ON

# SERIAL KILLERS

BY FRANK BRUNI  
Free Press Movie Critic

If real life in America mirrored its fiction and films, these are the kind of people who would prowl every corner of every town on every night:

- Someone who kills blind women, severing and hiding their uniquely toughened hands so no one will divine the pattern among victims (the movie "Jennifer 8," 1992).
- Someone who kills teenaged hustlers, placing communion wafers in their mouths, dismembering them, stowing the body parts in Styrofoam containers and burying them in public parks (the novel "Mortal Grace," 1994).
- Several people who slaughter whole families and use their blood for a ghoulish liquid diet (at least half a dozen paperback thrillers and one screen chiller, "Rampage," a 1992 release directed by William Friedkin).

■ Just as many who string up female corpses and bite them (among other places, last year's direct-to-video movie "Relentless 3," the third installment in a series devoted to serial killers).

This nation has gone serial killer mad. In nonfiction and fiction, in documentaries and feature films, these particular murderers, distinguished by their body counts and sometimes idiosyncratic methods, appear with a frequency that boggles the mind and chills the bone.

Director Oliver Stone's "Natural Born Killers," which opened Friday, taps this fascination. His homicidal heroes, Mickey and Mallory, technically straddle the boundary between what the FBI labels "spree killers" and "serial killers."

They end up on a tabloid TV show, See **KILLERS**, Page 5G

■ A gallery of fictional serial killers, Page 4G.

